

The Casket of Baktar

By
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*A Prequel in Four Acts
to C.S. Lewis' Work
"The Magician's Nephew"*

I. STRANGE MUSIC

THE PROPOSITION:

The Atlantean Emperor sat slouched on his throne watching the slave girls dance. The tiny bells stitched into the rim of their diaphanous silk skirts kept time to their frenetic moves, and the small jasper weights at the ends of their braids made their hair whip about as they gyrated. The pipers and drummers also outdid themselves, knowing that pleasing the Throne of Heaven could bring honors and riches, just as offending it could be the end of a career...or a life.

To say the dancers were lovely or that their movements were graceful was a supreme understatement. Even the royal bodyguard that stood by the throne lost his composure and his usual impassive stare turned to something more akin to ogling, and though his robust,

bare arms were still firmly crossed, his fingers nervously drummed against his taught biceps in time to the music.

The Emperor, however, was clearly impatient, waiting for the performance to end. Jorbrel was not one who cared too much for the pleasures of ordinary mortals—certainly not the pleasures ordinary mortals possessed but the ones they would daydream about. The ones they would indulge in if they could be Emperor of Atlantis, Lord of the Seven Realms and Keeper of the Mandate. It is precisely his predilection for other glories than nubile slave girls and strong drink that put him in that chair. And after the dance was over, Jorbrel politely but diffidently waved the women away.

The Royal Chamberlain approached, touched his forehead respectfully and said, “Your Eminence, Lord Baktar respectfully requests an audience.”

“I’ve never known him to be respectful in his life,” Jorbrel said, more amused than irritated. “So, was he smiling?”

“Oh yes, Your Eminence.”

“Good! By all means send him in!” He looked at the slave girls and musicians and in his sudden flush of good humor, added, “Send him in on your way out. Three gold nebbets and a round of Thracian wine for all of you! Now *go at once* before I change my mind!”

The exhausted but pleased young ladies and their musicians bundled out with a respectful touch of the forehead, and as they did so they were passed by a disheveled old man going the other way with a strange looking harp under his arm and a pipe.

Baktar stood before the Emperor and nodded. The Emperor nodded back. Clearly those who sold might carried more weight with the Throne of Heaven than those who sold beauty. Though the Emperor collected beautiful things, the money he spent for them—or the blood for that matter—came from his power.

“Well, old man, you bring me a harp. I take it you found just the right notes?”

“Beyond my wildest imaginings.” Baktar glanced at the bodyguard. “Does Your Eminence care for this secret to be shared with this mere servant?”

Baktar had just called him “Your Eminence,” and it got Jorbrel’s attention like a shout in a quiet glade. “That well? Still, this one has been with me for years. He is loyal to the death. Anything you can show me you can show him.”

“Very well, but it is best he covers his ears as tightly as he can. You too. I shall stop my ears with wax.”

“This dissonance of yours, can it really unsettle the mind?” Jorbrel leaned forward. “Can it really drive a

warrior mad who is already drunk with the wine of battle?”

“Not mad, Your Eminence. Worse than mad. Hold your ears and open your eyes. Behold a miracle!”

As soon as everyone had prepared themselves, the sage took up his instrument and placed his fingers carefully on certain strings marked with red. He paused for a moment to concentrate, or perhaps for dramatic effect, then he nodded toward a large urn planted with flowers. At once he plucked all the marked strings.

The brilliant colors of the flowers faded instantly to a deathly white, and within moments the blossoms, the stems, and even the urn began to shimmer and become clear. Then as quickly as an ice sculpture thrown in a furnace, even faster, the shape collapsed into a large puddle of clear water that splashed across the marble floor.

Baktar lowered his weapon and unstopped his ears. He looked at the stunned monarch and with classic understatement asked, “Would you be interested in an army of harpers that could turn high walls into rivers and fierce armies into stone?”

The Emperor sat still as stone himself for a moment, then he motioned at his bodyguard. “Lock the door from the inside.”

The bodyguard turned and headed for the door. As soon as his back was turned, Jorbrel drew a dagger from his cloak and tossed it, plunging it deeply into the man's back. The guard pitched forward and fell without more noise than a slight moan.

"What a shame," the Emperor said, walking over to his victim, regaining his blade and wiping the blade on the dead man's sleeve. "He was one of my best servants. But no one can see that and live."

"Present company excepted," Baktar said, more like a question than a statement.

"Of course." The Emperor stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Turn armies into stone, you say?"

"Yes." Baktar said, stepping over the body of the guard as he restlessly paced the room. "For centuries the Emperors of Atlantis were called Sons of Heaven. But I have watched two of them grow old and die and one be murdered. They are just people under their lofty titles. People like the fishmonger and the carpenter except for an accident of fate or a taste for blood."

"Careful!" the Emperor said. "You presume too much of our friendship!"

"Not you, Your Eminence! For you shall truly emanate! You too were once a man, but I will make you a Son of Heaven! You shall not keep mandates, you shall make them! When I have taught you the music of the

spheres, you will be a god and the heavens will tremble when you speak!”

“That’s blasphemy!”

“Blasphemy is what men do. Gods cannot commit blasphemy. Their words become the truth that weak mortals must respect.”

An ordinary man would not have grasped the full import of Baktar’s offer. He would have stood there a bit in shock and incomprehension. But Jorbrel was no ordinary man. He saw himself as the God of War, the Overlord, the Chariot of the Sun. The role pleased him without delay and he resolved to have it.

“I suppose you are a god now, Baktar?”

“No, I am a scholar. Give me the ultimate knowledge and you can keep Heaven and Earth for yourself! But when you sit on the true Throne of Heaven, remember my loyalty and years of service.”

“Never fear, old friend. Do this for me and I shall make you immortal.”

A METHOD TO THE MADNESS:

Jorbrel and Baktar had spent so much time alone locked in the chamber of the Royal Alchemist that people had begun to talk. All sorts of wild rumors surfaced

among the courtiers and inevitably spread to the common folk who shook their heads over a pint and sighed, "What queer goings on! Men of brass that have the strength of a thousand? Invisible armies you say? Doorways to another world?"

What actually happened behind those locked doors was every bit as awe inspiring. The "Music Room," as Lord Baktar shrewdly called it, was lined with all sorts of instruments designed to do one thing or another, none of it soothing to the soul. There were harps with only five or six strings that could be strummed quickly and confidently, only playing the sounds needed to transmute solid matter or cause huge boulders to fall from the sky. There was a six-reed shaum that could turn base metals into gold and a cistrum that when shook would cause brave men to flee in panic from imaginary horrors. But most of those instruments were weak because their sound did not carry far. Lord Baktar had a set of five trumpets which multiplied the effect. In fact, the instrument that produced the sound itself did not matter. That led to the most potent weapon of all being sketched out on vellum for the Emperor's eyes only. A huge steam powered siren whose sound alone might kill a man, but whose tone could level entire cities in a heartbeat. With a tuning slide so that any series of sounds could be played, it could rain fire from the sky, turn great towers to mist or even open a

fissure in the Earth to swallow whole peoples into darkness. Surely the invaders of the East had met their match in this!

The explosion of remarkable new powers all stemmed from the one thing the sounds all had in common. They were all variations on a chord of the notes Rush, Gimmel, and Thun. When augmented with other notes of the scale, this grand chord would do any number of different things. Jorbrel and Baktar would take turns playing a fascinating game of Russian Roulette, gambling on the outcome, often without ear protection in. Sounds that were variations of Ur and Zim generally did no physical harm, and when worse came to worst the major overtones of Hau, Isk and Shu would undo the majority of the harm. Occasionally an unlucky slave would be "invited" to these sessions. Some of them died swiftly and mercifully. Others lingered in the most hideous of agonies.

After nearly a year of trying every possible combination of sounds, the Grand Chord was discovered to the surprise of Lord Baktar when he looked for it to cause pain to a prisoner but instead melted him into wet sand. Baktar was familiar with the old myths about the song that created the universe, and though he was not a particularly religious man he did believe there was a kernel of truth behind the legend. But not because of the

words but rather the melody. If indeed everything that came to be was born from music, surely music was the missing link, the philosopher's stone, the key to eternity.

Most frightening of all, however, was that it was a key to other eternities. Bum, Isk, Gimmel, Hau...the most soothing of the varied sounds ever to come from the "Music Room," opened a doorway out of Atlantis. At its other end was a silent forest scattered with still ponds. Lord Baktar had brought his Emperor a rare gift, a spade full of earth from a different world. Surely even Arteban the Great with all his jewels had never owned anything so grand.

CLOUDS FROM THE EAST:

Tutankhsekmet was not a patient man. Despite the wonders he had seen on previous visits to Atlantis, he was a firm believer in the iron men of Cush and their Pharoah. It would take more than pretty toys to stop the thunderbolts of wrath from the Papyrus Throne from striking the infidels of Atlantis. After all, their Pharoah was a living god, and a word from him would turn the wrath of Isis and Osiris upon them. Who could stand against that?

"I bring word from He Who Dwells in Righteousness. He offers peace to the people of Atlantis and perpetual friendship that would be mutually beneficial to us but this can only be if you relinquish your claims to exclusive trade with the Northlanders. There is not much to be lost, but so much to be gained if we consider the whole situation. I'm sure between your great wisdom and our vast resources we could forge a worthy alliance."

Jorbrel listened with a smirk, waiting for the long winded Egyptian to finish. Then he said, "Tell He Who Dwells in Righteousness what the Throne of Heaven says. I shall pipe him pretty tune to make him forget his woes."

"What nonsense is this?"

"Nonsense, you say? Step out on the balcony with me. I have something to show you."

Jorbrel and Tutankhsekmet withdrew to the parapet where the harbor below sparkled gold in the evening sun. The Emperor put a horn to his lips and blew three short blasts, the pre-arranged signal for action. At that moment there was another bright light as a set of huge polished brass horns emerged from behind a large wooden door. "Behold your ship. in the harbor. A fine vessel, sadly lost before its time."

"What treachery is this??"

With a rush of steam, the five horns sounded at once. Briefly.

Many hentocks away in the sea, Lord Baktar stood at the stern of his vessel and scanned the horizon. It seems his caution had paid off.

Suddenly the sky lit up with the deadly brightness of a new angry sun, first appearing as a round flash, but then traveling upwards under the raw thermal energy until it took on the shape of a mushroom.

"Quick! Trim the sails! *Do it now if you want to live!*"

A couple of minutes passed in relative silence, the only sound being the shouting of the men on the yardarms bundling and tying off the sheets. Then the thundering wrath of nuclear fission came roaring past, tossing the vessel back and forth but fortunately stopping short of sinking it. The blast wave was past in less than a minute but it seemed an eternity.

Baktar stood there a moment, still clutching a small wooden box full of earth, and sighed. "Well my boys, head East."

"What about the war?" asked the captain. "What about Atlantis?"

"The war is over," Baktar replied. "There is no Atlantis."

II. THE SYRIAN

STRANGE ARRIVAL:

From the cloudless sky the sun ruthlessly stared down the sandy streets and whitewashed mud brick houses. An egg cracked atop a stone would have cooked in such unremitting heat and townsfolk moved along purposefully when they were forced outdoors on business, swathed in yards of white linen to deflect the celestial fire. It was, all in all, a perfect spring day in the desert town of Daibeh, a minor stepping stone along the Great Silk Road. And yet despite the climate there was activity: wherever water comes to the surface life manages to thrive. Women sat beneath canopies spinning their distaffs, taking the precious hand-dyed strands of wool to other women who skillfully turned them into intricate patterned carpets and items of clothing. A herdsman drove his sheep down the main street of

town...in fact it was the only street...and he looked genuinely puzzled that a caravan would come along to interrupt his leisurely stroll to the well to water his animals.

The trader's arrival with a train of heavily loaded camels attracted the attention of everyone from the men gambling in a doorway to the busiest of the weaver women. But it was the children that felt at liberty to rush the caravan, holding out their hands.

The trader, dressed in rich silks, tossed about a few coins which the children squabbled over briefly, then pocketing them, hurried away hissing with delight.

Finally one of the men left the doorway and approached the generous rider. "I am Chief Elder Lakresh. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Peace be with you, Lakresh. I understand that even this small town has a great wise man. I have a vexing problem to solve, and I offer gifts of great value to the man that can answer me well. Are you the one?"

The chief laughed. "No, milord. I wish." Then he angrily gestured at the sheep. "Is this the way we treat our guests? Move aside! Make way!"

As Lakresh walked along he kept looking up at the rider to talk, keeping eye contact even though he tripped more than once and nearly kicked over a woman's pot full of grain. "This man you seek is rather uncouth, but

he means no harm by it. He is wise beyond measure, and some say he does strange things in the moonlight. Many such wise men are a bit crazy. That and the heat will do it to anyone. Present company excepted, of course.”

“Of course,” laughed the trader. “And you are sure he can help me?”

“I am sure he can though I’m not sure he will. We call him Abu, though that is not his name. He is very close-mouthed about his past. For all I know he might have dropped from the sky. The desert draws such men. It is a good place to live if you want to be lost to the world.”

“Is he dangerous?”

“I would not say dangerous. He’s like a coconut, hard and dry on the outside, but when you look beneath the surface, tender and pleasant. But it is hard to look beneath his surface. He is not a trusting man and he can be churlish with strangers.”

TESTS AND TRIALS:

Abu was sitting under a palm tree doing what he often did, helping others with their problems. Two men stood before him. One was holding a chicken in the crook of one arm and gesturing wildly with the other. “I

do not deny that you raised the chicken from an egg,” said the man clutching the hen. “Still it ate the grain I had raised from a seed. If you cannot give me back my grain, I cannot give you back your chicken. Surely Abu, this wise and impartial man, can see the claim I hold on this bird!”

“Enough, enough!” the Chief Elder said. “Let this man in! I will pay for the chicken.”

“Thank you for your generosity,” the trader said, looking intently at Lakresh. “And thank you for giving me privacy. This gold coin should more than reimburse you.”

“Of course, of course! More than enough! Thank you, milord!”

The trader waited for the Chief Elder to get out of hearing range and watched his retreat until the man had stopped, looked about, and realized there was no chance of “accidentally” overhearing anything. And when he was quite sure they were alone, he dismounted from his camel, tying the reins to the palm tree.

“I am Suleyman of Damascus. I’m pleased to meet you.” He extended his arm for a hand clasp. A few awkward moments passed, then he lowered his arm. “Abu is it? There is no reason we cannot be friends.”

Abu met his glance for the first time, not the least bit timid. In fact his old green eyes seemed to bore into

the hazel eyes of the Syrian with a certain proud diffidence. “Suleyman of Damascus, I am a simple man. I am not ready to buy or sell.”

“I am not here to trade goods,” Suleyman said, pleased by the old man’s directness. “You are not like the others. Yet you are not a Cushite nor a Helene.” He looked closely at the round medallion the sage was wearing. It was adorned with three triangles. “Eska lokas Atalantu ni?” he asked.

“You speak Atlantee rather well.”

“I should. I used to visit Atlantis.” The trader sighed. “When I was a boy my favorite place was the Tower of Pendar. I would go up to the top and watch the ships come and go and think to myself that someday I too would be on one of those ships. Not a sailor but a captain, taking orders from no one and setting my own course in life. I got one eventually, and you know what I discovered?”

“That you take orders from your customers and they set your course.”

The trader laughed. “Even an Emperor takes orders.”

“Not always,” Abu said, breaking off eye contact briefly.

“You miss being there, don’t you?”

“I try not to.”

“And when it was gone you settled in this quaint little village in the middle of paradise. Everything you could want...sun, dust and sand.”

“And peace and true friends that consider a handshake a bargain.”

“Please don’t be offended. The greatest jewel ever worn is contentment. If this is your treasure, so be it. But why don’t you go to one of the great centers of learning and put your wisdom to use?”

Abu’s eyebrows raised for a moment, then he regained his unflappable composure. “I once thought I had no conscience and no God to answer to. I found out too late that I had a conscience, and now I’m open to the possibility that something out there will hold me accountable for a wasted life.”

Suleyman nodded. “I will pay you gold and jewels to solve my dilemma.”

“Thank you, no. I do not eat gold and jewels, yet a cup of tea and some civilized bread would be nice for a change. Also there is a man that gathers firewood whose donkey just died. He could use a young, strong animal to help him make a living.”

The trader nodded again. “Fair enough, depending on your answer.” He sat cross-legged on the ground. “There are twin sons that are heirs to a grand estate. Both are equally capable and both are equally respected. They

want to divide their father's land fairly, but neither one trust the other. They have put the burden on me, and I know there is no way to make such a decision without creating enemies. Can you help me, Abu?"

The old man thought for a moment, stroked his beard, and half closed his eyes. At last a smile came to his face, the first one the trader had seen. "You should have one son divide the land into two parts, then allow the other son to choose his half first."

Suleyman grinned broadly. "What a wise man! They shall be glad of these tidings!"

Abu shook his head. "I am wiser than you think. There are no sons and there is no land. Now that you have tested me, what do you really want?"

"You should have been a trader!" Suleyman drew closer and in a low voice said, "I have a long trade route and I hear gossip from all the far off lands. Amazing stories of flying carpets, sea serpents and resurrections from the dead. But there is one story that deeply troubles me. I hear from an old ship captain who came from Atlantis that it was blown from the sea by a great pillar of fire. He said there were men that presumed to become gods and make the heavens tremble."

Abu winced. "Great powers rightfully belong to those who have courage to use them but the wisdom not to. The Emperor had courage and he had a sort of

cleverness, but it takes patience and forbearance to turn cleverness into wisdom, and he had neither.”

“Then it is true,” the Syrian said gravely. “Much younger I was, a cabin boy, but I will never forget the day I met the great Lord Baktar, the wisest man alive. I thought then as I do now that if I ever saw him again, even greatly changed, that I would know him at once by his knowing eyes.”

Abu drew back. “So did the Cushites send you to fetch me, hmm? To discover the secrets of Atlantis? I will not go nor will a word of mine go back to the Papyrus Throne. I would rather die first.”

“Peace, Abu! I have no desire to spread wickedness in this already wicked world. This sad tale has troubled me since I heard it. I believe that all wisdom is sent from the gods for the good of mankind. I grieve for those who have done without the blessings you can give. I sold my ship and became a trader so I could search for you, Lord Baktar.”

“Can’t you let an old man die in peace?” Baktar’s face lost its hard quality and seemed to plead with sighs too deep for words. “What will it take for me to get rid of you?”

“Get rid of me? Lands and wealth I have but they have not made me happy. I believe if I had the power to

do good in the world that I could be happy. Teach me how to make the world a better place.”

Baktar lunged forward, grabbed the trader by the shoulders and looked long and penetratingly into his eyes. The Syrian did not flinch but looked back.

"You speak the truth, trader man. There are no lies in you."

"Baktar...Abu...if all your wisdom dies with you, so dies the hope of the world."

The old man sighed, then went into his house to fetch something. He came out with a five reed pipe. "This is a strange music, the Song of Creation. The Music of the Spheres. Listen, look, learn!"

Abu took in a deep breath, then blew a loud, sustained note. Suddenly in the sand before him the surface seemed to melt like ice. Before long there was a spring flowing at their feet.

Suleyman reached down and with his cupped hands drew up some of the liquid life. "Once in the mountains I drank from a stream as fresh as this! And it is cold!"

Abu nodded. "If you took this you could make the deserts of the world bloom. People would sing your praises for a thousand years."

The trader stared at the marvelous spring, but he said, "While this tune of yours interests me, I care nothing for songs of praise."

"Then act anonymously. Think nothing of taking credit. Spread fertility across this land for the joy of watching flowers grow."

"That is not wise. Everything has its own beauty, including the desert. You have lived here for years, can you not see how simple and grand it is! A place where all that is impure gets burned from men's souls and only the gold is left behind. Who are we to question the wisdom of the gods? "

"I passed your test. Now you passed mine. I have some things for you, Syrian, if you will swear to uphold the greater good over life itself. You will be my legacy. Make it a good one."

AFTERNOON STROLL:

Baktar wandered into the desert on his usual afternoon stroll. He had much to think about, wondering if giving his notes and relics to the Syrian...even the small box of soil...was a good idea. Should he have burned it all?

He saw huge lion tracks in the sand. With the ever present wind there was no doubt that a big cat had passed by shortly. He felt it might be wise to turn back.

There was a roar. Baktar looked behind him and saw an enormous lion. His first impulse was to run, but he knew a sudden dash might trigger an attack. Trembling he turned and began to walk back toward his house, hoping against hope that the great predator would not be hungry.

Then another lion appeared in front of him. Either that or the first lion had circled back around to cut him off.

"I thirst," said the lion. "Have you any water?"

Baktar stood stunned for a moment, then he got enough of his wits about him to give an intelligent reply. "Yes, I do. Fine, cool water, milord."

The old man pulled the five reed pipe from his pouch—his one remaining tool—and blew it. Within moments a spring of cool water came from the sand.

"That's very good," said the lion. "Can you do this?" The lion tilted his head back and sang, not a rough, roaring voice but an incredibly pure, beautiful set of notes. There in the sand appeared a table with a white linen cloth upon which sat a gold pitcher, a silver chalice and a plate with bread. "Pour yourself some wine," the lion said. "Break bread with me."

"Who are you??"

"Long before the mountains rose and long after they have crumbled, I am."

"No!!" Baktar reached up with trembling hands and ripped his robe in grief. "My one hope was that death would be oblivion, and I would not have to face you with blood on my hands!"

"Why do you rend your garment? There is justice from the Throne of Heaven, but there is also mercy. Drink the wine of forgiveness and eat the bread of life. They who do this shall be sustained by grace. I offer grace to you."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Lord Baktar, I knew you before you were born and I shall know you after you die."

Tears sprang to Baktar's eyes. "How I longed to hear you say that! Longed but did not dare to ask!" He drew close to the table and looked at its rich appointments. "Why, Lord, if this is so great, do you not make this available to everyone?"

"When the appointed day is come, my table shall be open to all who seek refreshment. For now it is enough that you believe."

"I believe," Baktar said with hushed reverence, taking the pitcher and filling his glass. He lifted his

chalice and said, “To forgiveness!” but the lion had disappeared.

III. A FAIRY'S TALE

THE LIBERATION:

(Waltham Forest, near London, England, 1571 AD)

Old Gertie was walking through the quiet glades, enjoying the fine summer day. She was always called “Old Gertie” for she was quite gray and heavily lined, yet her stride was long and purposeful and there was no hint of stoop to her shoulders. Her clothes were not fancy but neither were they poor, and they were always immaculately kept. She was something of an enigma to her neighbors, none of whom knew much about her except that she avoided crowds and seldom went to Mass.

However a great many rumors swirled about her. One of the most popular is that she was seen in the company of the mystical White Stag of Waltham, and that he danced about her as she played wild and beautiful

music on panpipes. While none of the rumors were threatening, they were odd enough that few people dared ever approach her with more than, “Good day, ma’am.” Those brave enough to do so often reported a stroke of good luck later in the day. One debtor who asked about her health found a small purse of gold coins in the road though many had passed that way and not seen it. Another fellow even heard what he swore was her voice telling him “Step forward if you want to live.” He did so, and seconds later a large tavern sign came crashing down right where he stood. Shaken but grateful he looked into the alley where the voice seemed to come but saw no one there.

Old Gertie's keen ears heard a snap, a yelp, and a commotion in the brush. She ventured off the road and soon located the source of the disturbance. A fox frantically tried to get his leg out of the trap that had been set for him. He was pulling against the chain that had been staked deeply into the earth. The bright red of his leg was besotted with the dark crimson of fresh blood.

“Poachers!” she said, her face red with rage. Then she regained her composure, waved her hand and calmly said, “Peace, child, be still.”

The fox immediately stopped struggling and turned to face her, looking up at with pleading eyes.

“A moment more and I will have you free.”

A man emerged from the wood. “Hie! It’s mine, old woman! Off with ye!”

She ignored him, reaching for the chain while speaking soft love words to the poor trapped animal.

“Didn’t you hear me??” the man shouted, coming forward menacingly, sword drawn. “I said *off with ye!*”

“I heard you,” she said, stretching a hand toward him.

The man gasped, then stood there blankly for a moment, looking about puzzled, then glancing down at his sword as if wondering what to make of the shine of metal in his hands. Then he wandered aimlessly off into the trees without saying a word or bothering to sheathe his blade.

She bent the springs down and opened the trap. The fox winced in pain, but then sniffed her hand and licked it. She patted him on the head and passed her hand across the injured leg. “By the power of the Great Lion who makes the four winds blow, be whole.”

The fox looked about and sniffed his leg. There was nothing to see. Then he looked back into her eyes, squealed and jumped up on her like a puppy needing attention. She picked up the fox, cuddled him for a moment, then kissed him and set him free. Finally with a strength that belied her outward appearance she grabbed

the trap and ripped it up stake and all with one tug, then she bent it in two with her hands and threw it away.

In the bushes there was another sound of scrambling feet. Another man ran off in a panic and he was far away before she had time to react.

STRANGE CONFESSIONS:

The priest was kneeling in the privacy of his church before a statuette of the Virgin.

Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariæ,

Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto.

Ecce Ancilla Domini.

Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum...

In burst the second poacher. “Father, please, hear my confession!”

“Can’t you see I am at prayer?”

The man crossed himself before the statuette. “Forgive me, Mother of God, but I do the work of my Heavenly Father. I know you’ll understand.” He turned to the priest. “It is an emergency of the worst kind or I would not have dared.”

“You appear to be in good health...”

“Please, Father, wait till you hear my story.”

“Very well. How long has it been since your last confession?”

“Too long.” It was an unorthodox answer but it got the priest’s attention. He knelt before the priest. “Father forgive me for I have sinned and am not worthy to be called thy son.”

“What is on your heart, my son?”

“I was poaching in the King’s Forest and had caught a fox in a trap....”

“That is a serious offense. If the Sheriff had caught you, your life might be forfeit.”

“Not that! An abomination! An act against God and Nature!” He nervously cleared his throat. “When I was coming to claim the prize, a woman showed up and tried to spring the trap. It was old Gertie. When my brother Stephen tried to stop her, she cursed him and he ran away with the madness. For a day and a night he didn’t know who he was or even know his own mother! Then I saw her bewitch the fox and call upon unholy powers to heal its leg. I ran away before she could catch me. My sin is that I neglected to report this sorcery for three days out of fear for my own crimes. I may be a thief but I’m not a blasphemer and I cannot die with this on my conscience.”

“I see,” the priest said gravely. “I realize that Gertie is strange and hardly ever comes to Mass, but I’ve never seen her harm a living soul. These are very serious charges that, if proven, would mean her death. Are you quite certain this is the truth? Would you swear this upon the Holy Scriptures?”

“Not only would I, Father, I welcome the chance. God had his purpose in sitting me there to see this abomination. It is a sign from Heaven to give up my craft and take up honest work. Pray for me.”

“I shall indeed. I grant you absolution for your courage, my son. I will report the crime to the Sheriff without mentioning names. He shall put Gertie to the question.” The priest sighed. “There is no need to involve your brother, but I expect him to confess and do penance before he shows his face at Mass again.”

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS:

In a holding cell at the bailey, Old Gertie sat in the corner on a bench. A stirring in the hay revealed a rat that shared her dungeon. Unafraid, she reached down and scooped the rodent up, stroking it as one might fondle a cat. The rodent churred with approval and made no attempt to escape. There were footsteps approaching. She

sat the rat down and said, "Hide, quickly!" She did not have to repeat herself.

In came the Magistrate with two guards. "Gertie," he said forcefully, "you are accused of being a witch."

"I am not a witch," she spat. "I am a faithful servant of the Lord and a dame of the Sovereign Order of Jericho!"

"I know not that order."

"As you say, a fairy, though we prefer to be called Jerusites."

"Gertie, we have found forbidden books in your house, odd instruments which play no decent tune and this jewel box filled with common earth! We have a witness that saw you curse a man to oblivion and bewitch a fox! Call it what you will, Gertie, *you are a witch.*"

"And Magistrate, *you are a fool!*"

One of the guards bit his lip. The other snickered briefly before he regained his composure. The Magistrate turned deep red but managed to cling to his dignity.

"I will choose to ignore that—for now—given the circumstances. I understand you were helping a dumb animal and plus you were foiling a poacher of the King's game. For these redeeming mercies I will likewise show mercy. I came here before your arraignment so you could plead before me guilty in private and have a quick death. If I put you to the question in court, it would be most

unpleasant, and when found guilty as there is no doubt in the matter, you would be burned at the stake. If you gave me the names of others, I might even be persuaded to allow you access to clergy so that you might repent and your immortal soul might yet escape the judgment.”

“How utterly kind of you,” she said with disgust. “No thank you. I will not swear to a lie.”

“Are you certain it is a lie? Are you quite certain? We might be forced to conclude that the animal you saved was actually your familiar. And that he would feel compelled to hunt down every fox in the wood that the demon involved might not escape God’s justice.”

Her face went white. “Enough, you barbarian!” She held up her hand and there was a bright white flash. Then quite easily she passed through the bars of the cell as if they were only shadows. “Hand me the box this minute.”

He is shocked. “What witchcraft is this?? Guards, seize her!”

He looked on either side but the men did not move. In fact they did not breathe or blink. Outside the small window was the ankle of a man passing by, frozen still. The Magistrate looked outside in the hall. Even the flames of the torches were frozen like yellow flowers preserved in a book.

He came back. "Gertie, I command you in the name of Christ to..."

"The box...*now*." She snatched it from his grasp with a speed and strength that would have amazed anyone. "We received this box over four millennia ago from Saint Sulaymen of Damascus. It is a holy relic of great power."

"It is a box full of dirt!"

"It is the soil from the hub of creations, another world and yet no world at all."

"No such world is mentioned in the Holy Scriptures. This is blasphemy! I command you in the name of Christ to go back to your cell and there await the sure and certain punishment of this court! In the name of..."

She held out the box. "Prove me the liar. Touch the soil. If you are a man of faith no harm can come to you."

"A curse on you, witch!" He pulled out his crucifix and nervously made the sign of the cross. Then he stepped forward and snapped, "Open the lid."

She did. The dirt inside issued a low, ominous humming. He paused for a moment, reached out his hand, extended his index finger, and ever so slowly closed the last few inches of the gap between worlds. He touched the dust.

The crucifix hit the floor where, in his moment of trial he had opened his other hand and let it slip. But of the rest of him nothing was ever found. "Wherever you are," she said quietly, "I hope you learned something from this." She picked up the crucifix, kissed it and placed it around her neck. Then she passed the guards and waited until she reached the front door before waving her hand and restoring the flow of time.

IV. CHANGING OF THE GUARD

"There was never such a break-up. All the old buoys which have marked the channel of our lives seem to have been swept away."

*--Lord Esher, commenting on the death of Edward VII,
May 1910*

THE HOSPITAL ROOM:

A tall, disheveled elderly man with long, stringy hair was met by a grave looking doctor outside the door to Room 203.

"Andrew Ketterly, right?"

"Yes. I'm Sylvia Lefay's godson. I realize this is immediate family only, but her husband is dead, she had no children, and I'm her only living relative."

“She told me about you,” the doctor said with a scowl. “If you want to take your leave of her, don’t try to unburden your conscience at her expense. For God’s sake, let that old woman die in peace.”

“I assure you sir, I will do just that. But I would appreciate a little privacy with her. She may want to tell me things not meant for others to hear.”

“I can imagine,” the doctor spat, stepping past him without so much as a pat on the back or a handshake.

The stringy haired man stalked into the room, closing the door quietly but firmly behind him, then walked over to the bed where the white haired woman lay under starched white linens and a green institutional blanket. It was not quite the death Sylvia wanted. People of her sort prefer to die at home in bed or best yet walking through a sun spattered glade suddenly and closer to God. Next to her bed an arrangement of flowers seemed to mock her with their display of freshness and vitality. They represented everything she had lost and emphasized the sterility of the rest of her environment.

“Sylvia. Sylvia? It’s me. Andrew.”

Her eyes opened and turned to face him. “Andrew, I’m so glad you came. I knew you would.”

“For you, anything.” He drew close to her and ran his fingertips across her hair. “I know you think I have no heart, but I do and it’s breaking.”

She reached up and held his hand weakly, giving it a little squeeze. "That's kind of you to say, whether it's true or not. I shall pretend that it is."

"But Sylvia..."

"Don't explain. I'm sure you love me as much as you can love anyone. You can't help the way you are. It's my fault."

He squeezed her hand back. "You must not reproach yourself so."

She shook her head lightly. "If I had been a full blooded Jerusite, I would have borne my secrets to the grave. But I let my humanity get the best of me. I was so lonely when George died. I told you things you ought not to have heard and I failed you."

He sighed. "You didn't fail me. In my own way I am happy. That is all you can wish for anyone. Besides I don't want to be just like everyone else. I was born different. I like being unique just fine."

SIGNS AND SIGNALS:

The story of Andrew's relationship with Mrs. Lefay started many years ago, harmlessly enough. He was a young boy then and Sylvia a vital woman who looked young for her age, an age that no one precisely

knew as very little was known about her. She liked it that way, as most fairies do, even when they're not full blooded.

Andy hated to be indoors. He loved to take long walks in the wood and enjoyed bringing the outdoors inside to the great consternation of his parents. He never had a puppy or a kitten, but kept many spiders, a poisonous snake, some turtles and a frog. His fascination with such things intrigued Sylvia and she sought to steer his curiosity and spirit in the right direction.

After George Lefay died, Sylvia spent more time with the boy, taking him on walks in the country, teaching him the passwords and signs used by the forest folk to unlock the deeper meanings of nature. She used her inborn abilities to put on harmless little demonstrations of nature's power and beauty. But to her regret the power impressed him more than the beauty. Once she crafted him a delicate treasure for his room, turning a couple of baskets of flowers into pure gold with a wave of her wand. Even then he regarded its mystery over its delicate loveliness.

She introduced him to many forest creatures. He had actually held a wild vixen and her pups in his lap and felt their living squirming bodies next to his. He had hawks land on his outstretched wrist and pranced with deer on the bowling lawn. He called squirrels from the

trees and laughed as they ran up his pants to take refuge on his shoulder.

As fascinating as he found all that, he had a different, morbid appreciation of nature that was disturbing. He kept a little "zoo" made of animals he found dead and stuffed himself. He became an avid student of anatomy and quite a good taxidermist. Sylvia hated that side of his personality and would not come see his work. Andy found a different audience, inviting the neighborhood kids in for a penny a head. Quite the little entrepreneur he would use the money to buy real glass eyes to make his collection more lifelike.

Still for all the road kill and natural causes, he had too many squirrels but no badgers. People wanted to see a badger close up and he wanted to have one for the crowning glory of his collection. Then one day he "found" one. Sylvia saw the poor unfortunate dead creature and gasped.

"I hear its spirit crying to me in the wind."

Andy looked guilty. "What do you mean? I don't hear anything."

Then Sylvia looked in his eyes. "You?? You snared it?? You wantonly killed one of God's innocent creatures for a mere hobby??" She took the body tenderly in her arms and cradled it as tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Andrew, how could you??"

Andy looked down and scuffed his feet. "Oh for goodness sake, it's only a badger! It's not like I killed a real person!"

She glared at him. "Go home, Andrew. I don't think I like you anymore."

He rarely saw her after that except at Christmas and Easter and it was always tense between them. And she never taught him anything else about the ways of the wild woods.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED BY:

After Andrew Ketterly's tantalizing glimpses of a greater truth, he chafed at the restrictions of human knowledge. He wanted more. He was a very bright boy but he did not do well in school because he was not interested in their conventional ideas and they thought his unconventional theories were insane. After one brief, unpleasant experience at a local college, he dropped out of traditional schooling never to return.

Instead he turned to darker, more disreputable sources for inspiration. He went through the disciplines of the Rosicrucian Order, the arcana of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and he even met with Aleister Crowley whom he said deserved his reputation as an outstanding

chess player, but the Devil could take the rest of that vain, self-important man. Crowley used opium and drank, both things Andrew hated intensely not out of moral qualms but because they dulled the intellect. Eventually Andrew realized there was no back door to fairy wisdom among the mystical societies.

He had a momentary diversion from his appointment with destiny in the form of Natalie Sorensen. Andrew despised weakness of any sort and held the majority of traditionally feminine women in contempt. For him his ideal goddess was not Venus but Athena, a tower of strength, wisdom and reason. In short, he wanted another Sylvia Lefay to fill that missing hole in his life. Natalie appeared to be such a girl, but she tired of his belief in his own great destiny and was horrified at his lack of basic human decency. Her break with him crushed the last bit of sentiment in his heart and he threw himself anew into the chase for nature's grand secret. He decided to look at the source, to go to Jericho. The only problem is he had no money.

SAY IT WITH FLOWERS

He resolved to sell these gold flower arrangements for what he could get. He approached Joshua Goldstein

with what he billed as an “exquisite work of art with such fine craftsmanship you can see the veins in the leaves!” Given Andrew’s disheveled appearance he did not look like a legitimate owner of so fine a treasure. Mr. Goldstein said, “I will give you a break, kid, if you leave NOW and never come back.”

He felt the same thing would likely happen at Kressge’s Jewelers so he prepared himself. He borrowed money to rent a suit, combed his hair, and showed up looking more splendid than he’d been wont to do for years.

Mr. Kressge was more open to the possibility of making a purchase. He looked at the daffodils and was enamored with them. “You can even see the individual veins!” he said. He was so sure it was a real flower painted gold that he made the sacrifice of removing a small leaf and putting it in the water balance. It was, in fact, absolutely pure gold. He was awestruck.

“I don’t have enough money in my entire store to give you anything like what this is worth. This is worthy of a king.”

“Well I’m about to take a trip to Canada to look into some mining properties. You know how it is...big estate but not much free cash on hand.”

“What do you want for it?”

Andrew cagily said, "A gentleman of my estate does not haggle like an Arab trader. Make an offer and I'll tell you what I think of it."

Mr. Kressge looked at it again and shook his head. "I won't insult you. Take this to Mr. Faberge. He's looking for things like this for the Russian Tsar."

Another well dressed man in the shop came over. "I couldn't help overhearing this conversation. I don't mean to pry, but I'm Geoffrey Lord Carolton. I'm looking for just the right thing for the wife's 25th wedding anniversary." He examined it closely. "I say! That IS a handsome pair. Would you consider 450 pounds worth your while?"

Andrew hid his excitement and said as loudly and clearly as he could, which wasn't much, "I think that would cover it."

THE QUEST:

Andrew Ketterley took the next liner to Jericho. His single-mindedness was clear to all who had a hand in arranging his travel plans. He showed no interest in side trips to Jerusalem or Bethlehem. Indeed he had little regard for a carpenter's son who was executed for claiming to be the Son of God. He spent his time instead

poring through the library and archives and even traveling through the streets looking for someone that would tell him about the secretive Sovereign Order of Jericho.

Finally he got his hopes up when someone agreed—for a price—to arrange a meeting with a member at midnight deep in the Al Salaam district. His interpreter tried to talk him out of it but he had not come hundreds of miles for nothing.

Even when his interpreter ran off in a panic, Andrew kept on. He made his rendezvous and when the clock struck 12, a hooded figure stepped out of a side street. An elderly female voice asked in passable English, “Are you Andrew Ketterley?”

“That I am. Are you from The Order?”

“What do you want with us?”

“I want to join the Order. I would give all I own now—or would ever own—to be a Knight of the Order of Jericho.”

“One does not join the Order except through birth. It is our legacy, Mr. Ketterley, and envy us not, for it is a great weight to bear.”

“Teach me,” he said. “I can bear that weight. All I cannot bear is going through life not knowing. I already know the passwords of the wild wood. I can talk the squirrel from its tree. But I want to know the whole truth,

not just bits and pieces. Glimpses of Paradise are worse than living in complete ignorance."

"Knowledge is but a tool we use to serve. Knowledge without works is dead. You are not a servant.."

"Then teach me to be a servant!"

"That is like teaching the wind to blow. Where virtue does not sleep, we cannot wake it."

He became agitated. "You don't understand! Why would such knowledge exist except to elevate its owners from the clinging mud? Why don't I have the right to raise humanity up to its potential??" He came forward and struck a match. He caught a brief glance of her angry face in the light before she raised her hand. There was a great wind that threw him against the wall in the darkness.

"Leave while you still can!" she said. "I would hate to stain my hands with blood."

She disappeared by the time he got his wits about him. He had muffed his chance to seek the Order and went home in defeat. And yet he knew more than ever that there was one true source of power and he determined to get it. Even if it meant crawling back to Mrs. Lefay. And there he was, hovering about her death bed like a jackal though he fancied himself a lion.

BACK TO THE SICK ROOM:

Mrs. Lefay looked helplessly at Andrew and shook her head. "I am the last Jerusite Dame in England. No one is left that is qualified to safely hold the artifacts of virtue. "People hear about such things and they think you're insane. They confined me because I told a truth they refused to hear." She sighed. "Now great armies look enviously across the borders of Europe. Before you die you will see the world set ablaze and there will be none of my kind left to stop it. I may be dying, but I pity you your fate." She had a coughing spell. "How much easier it is to die before the sun sets and the awful night sets in. You may wish you had changed places with me someday."

"The world set ablaze?"

"I foresaw it. I even went to warn the Prime Minister. I tried to see old Gladstone himself and all I encountered were a series of secretaries and receptionists and other cogs in the wheels of government. I knew I'd never get in to see him, so I just walked in. I told him to change the course he was steering before it was too late and warned him that nature was about to come unraveled. That man would have the power to destroy his own world." She coughed. "You know he's as pesky as the Labour party says he is. He just pushed a button

under his desk and whoosh, I was out of there before I knew what hit me! They took me for psychiatric evaluation.”

“And yet they didn’t find you insane. Did the doctor believe your story?”

“After I turned his tie into a snake he did. Oh not a poisonous one, but it made a real impression.”

“Haw haw, I bet it did!”

“Problem is, it was either hospital or prison. They put me in prison. Politics you know. They treated me well. I had talks with the warden and was free to move about the grounds. He’s not a bad sort, you know. He liked me.”

“So he knew you were right?”

“Since when does being right mean anything where politics are concerned?” She started to laugh, but then a look of pain crossed her face. “Oh my!”

“Sylvia?”

“Not much time now. Andrew, listen carefully. I hid a carved wooden box in the side of the fireplace mantel. On the right. The house is locked up but there is a key under the large stone in the flower garden.”

“Mantel on the right. Stone in the garden. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Wait, this is very important. That box is very dangerous in the wrong hands. There is a letter next to

the box with instructions. Before you touch the box, before you even remove it, read the letter. You must destroy the box at once using those instructions. Carefully follow them. No shortcuts or substitutions. Understand?”

“Yes, dear. Rest yourself easy.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise.”

“And now look in the drawer and get the small velvet pouch. Hurry, not much time.”

“Is it magic?”

“No, but it’s very important.”

He retrieved a small purple purse embroidered in gold thread in the letters OoJ and a lion rampant. Inside was a stunning brooch in the shape of a Maltese cross with a large ruby in the center. “Wow,” Andrew said, unaware she owned anything of such value.

“Pin it on me. I know this is a hospital robe but...” She had a coughing spasm and Andrew stood there a moment not sure what to do. But she regained her composure and pointed with her finger to the left lapel. “Here.” He carefully opened the clasp and fastened it to her gown. She smiled and patted his hand. “I want to die a Dame of the Order.” She breathed another deep sigh and said, “I hate to order you about. You’re a grown

man. But it is important that I die alone. Go now. Please. And God be with you my dear Andy.”

He nodded, kissed her forehead, and trudged out of the room. The doctor met him outside and asked, “Is she?”

“Not yet. She wants to die alone. It was her stated wish.”

“I understand,” the doctor said, glaring at him.

“No you don’t!” Andrew said, suddenly belligerent. “I’m tired of your sniping remarks. She’s the only person on earth that ever loved me, and that includes my parents!”

Then suddenly, quite clearly, Sylvia called out, “Aslan!”

Andrew, thinking she was calling to him, went back and stuck his head in the door. He caught a glimpse of her smiling peacefully, reaching out with an arm, then suddenly falling lifeless. At that moment she became quite mist like and vanished. The covers flattened of their own accord and there was only a dent in the pillow to show someone was once there.

This was at once very sad and very frightening. Even in the heat of the moment Andrew Ketterley knew he was in trouble if he did not get out at once.

He shut the door, glanced at the doctor, and said, “Remember her last wish. For God’s sake give her a few

minutes to pass alone. It's a family tradition...some sort of religious thing. I wouldn't know...it's from mother's side of the family and I was raised Catholic."

"I'll give her five minutes. No more."

Andrew used his five minute head start wisely, leaving the hospital as quickly as he could and hurriedly flagging down a cab. Naturally there would be a stir, and no doubt the hospital would be searched. But with the doctor stationed at the door and the window closed and locked from the inside, what could they accuse him of? Not a single bloody thing, that's for sure.

"Where to?" asked the cabbie.

"Sylvia's house," Andrew said quickly, then corrected himself. "429 Barston Place. And hurry."

He had a note to read and a box to retrieve. She had burned all her books, no doubt, and all her strange musical instruments, certainly. But the box, the wonderful box with the gold filigree and lapis lazuli decorations on the lid, was his at last. That was his legacy. "Thank you, Sylvia, despite yourself." And at the mention of her name, he did let fall a few tears. She was right...as much as Andrew could possibly love anyone but himself, he loved her.

THE END